

ANALYZING WRITING IN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES: A FEW CONCEPTS

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Abstract. The analytic frame presented in this contribution seeks to enable careful, systematic and complex consideration of the various factors that contribute to language use in disciplinary settings across all grade levels. Three key concepts are presented: disciplinary awareness, disciplinary configurations, and writing universes, in which genres and practices interact. Describing the elements of these three concepts leads to a foregrounding of the tensions that student writers must negotiate as they produce language acts in different disciplinary contexts. The contribution bases its exploration of an analytic frame for language activity in the disciplines on insights developed through extended study of the work of apprentice writers and speakers in various settings, studying their interactions with scholastic and disciplinary life through their interaction with and representations of the objects and modes associated with different school subjects.

Key words: disciplinary awareness, disciplinary configuration, writing universe, subject position, school subject

Dutch

[Translation Tanja Janssen]

Samenvatting. Het analytische kader in deze bijdrage poogt recht te doen aan de verschillende factoren die een bijdrage leveren aan taalgebruik in de verschillende vakgebieden, in alle leerjaren. Drie begrippen staan centraal: bewustzijn van vakgebied, configuraties van vakgebieden, en schrijfwerelden, waarin genres en toepassingen interacteren. Het beschrijven van de elementen van deze drie begrippen leidt tot het voorstellen van spanningen die leerling-schrijvers ervaren, wanneer zij taalactiviteiten moeten uitvoeren binnen verschillende vakken of contexten. In deze bijdrage baseren wij ons op uitgebreid onderzoek naar het werk van beginnende schrijvers en sprekers in verschillende contexten. Dit onderzoek bestudeert hun interacties met het schoolse en vakgerichte leven, door hun interactie met en voorstellingen van de objecten die met de verschillende schoolvakken geassocieerd worden.

Trefwoorden: bewustzijn van vakgebied, configuratie van vakgebied, schrijfwereld, schoolvak, positie van schoolvak

French

[Translation Christiane Donahue]

Resumé. Le cadre d'analyse présenté dans cette contribution vise à permettre de prendre en considération de façon attentive, systématique et complexe les divers facteurs qui contribuent aux usages langagiers dans les contextes disciplinaires à tous les niveaux. Trois concepts principaux sont présentés : la conscience disciplinaire, les configurations disciplinaires, et les univers de l'écrit, dans lesquels les genres et les pratiques interagissent. Décrire les éléments de ces trois concepts nous mène à une mise en avant de tensions que les étudiants doivent négocier pendant qu'ils produisent des actes langagiers dans différents contextes disciplinaires. La contribution se fonde sur un cadre d'analyse de l'activité langagière de disciplines à partir des perspectives développées dans une étude des productions écrites et orales des étudiants ; il s'agit de mettre en lumière leurs interactions avec la vie scolaire et disciplinaire au travers de leur relation avec des objets et des modes langagiers associés à des contenus scolaires et au travers des représentations qu'ils en ont.

Italian

[Translated by Francesco Caviglia]

Abstract. L'approccio analitico proposto in questo articolo intende rendere possibile un esame attento, sistematico e complesso dei vari fattori che contribuiscono all'uso del linguaggio in contesti disciplinari attraverso tutti i livelli scolastici. Vengono proposti tre concetti chiave: consapevolezza disciplinare, configurazioni disciplinari e universi di scrittura, nei quali interagiscono generi e pratiche testuali. Descrivere gli elementi di questi tre concetti porta in evidenza le tensioni che gli studenti di scrittura devono negoziare nel momento in cui producono atti linguistici in diversi contesti disciplinari. Questo contributo si basa sull'esplorazione di un approccio analitico riguardante le attività linguistiche nell'ambito delle discipline su idee sviluppate attraverso lo studio approfondito delle opere di apprendisti scrittori e oratori in vari contesti, con attenzione particolare alle loro interazioni con la vita scolastica relativa alle discipline, attraverso l'esame delle loro interazioni con e rappresentazioni degli oggetti e modi comunicativi associati alle differenti materie scolastiche.

Parole chiave: consapevolezza disciplinare, configurazione disciplinare, universo di scrittura, statuto delle discipline, materia scolastica

Polish

[translated by Elżbieta Awramiuk]

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie ramy analitycznej, która umożliwi dogłębne, systematyczne i kompleksowe rozważania nad różnymi czynnikami towarzyszącymi użyciu języka w poszczególnych dyscyplinach na wszystkich poziomach edukacyjnych. Prezentujemy trzy kluczowe pojęcia: świadomość przedmiotu, przedmiotowe konfiguracje i uniwersalia pisania, w których współdziałają gatunki i ćwiczenia. Opisywanie elementów tych trzech pojęć prowadzi do uwypuklenia napięć, które piszący studenci muszą pokonać, kiedy tworzą akty mowy w kontekstach różnych dyscyplin. Autorzy opierają swe poszukiwania analitycznej ramy językowej aktywności w poszczególnych dyscyplinach na spostrzeżeniach sformułowanych podczas szeroko zakrojonych badań pracy uczniów piszących i mówiących w różnych sytuacjach. Obserwują, jak uczniowie radzą sobie na szkole na lekcjach różnych przedmiotów, wchodząc w interakcje ze sposobami przedstawiania obiektów typowymi dla poszczególnych przedmiotów nauczania.

Słowa-klucze: świadomość przedmiotu, przedmiotowe konfiguracje, uniwersalia pisania, pozycja przedmiotu, przedmiot szkolny

Portuguese

[Translation Paulo Feytor Pinto]

Resumo. O quadro analítico apresentado neste texto procura facultar uma reflexão cuidadosa, sistemática e complexa acerca dos vários factores que contribuem para o uso da língua em contextos disciplinares, em todos os níveis de ensino. Três conceitos basilares são apresentados: a consciência disciplinar, as configurações disciplinares e os universos de escrita em que interagem géneros e práticas. A descrição das componentes destes três conceitos conduz ao realçar das tensões com que os estudantes-escreventes têm de lidar quando utilizam a língua em diferentes contextos disciplinares. A exploração de um quadro analítico da actividade linguística nas disciplinas baseia-se, neste texto, em perspectivas desenvolvidas em muitos estudos sobre o trabalho de aprendizagem da escrita e da oralidade em diferentes contextos, sobre a sua

interacção com a vida académica e disciplinar e com os objectos e modos associados às diferentes disciplinas escolares.

Palavras-chave: consciência disciplinar, configuração disciplinar, universo da escrita, estrutura curricular, disciplina escolar

Spanish

[Translation Ingrid Marquez]

Resumen. El marco analítico presentado en esta contribución pretende hacer posible la consideración cuidadosa, sistemática y compleja de varios factores que contribuyen al uso correcto del lenguaje en ambientes disciplinarios para cualquier grado escolar. Se presentan tres conceptos claves: la conciencia de la disciplina, sus configuraciones y el universo de la escritura, y cuáles son los géneros y prácticas que pueden interactuar. Una descripción de los elementos comprendidos en estos tres conceptos establece las bases necesarias para entender las tensiones que enfrenta un estudiante-escritor al crear productos lingüísticos en diferentes contextos disciplinarios. El estudio parte de la exploración de un marco analítico para la actividad lingüística en diferentes disciplinas desde perspectivas desarrolladas a través de largas investigaciones del trabajo de escritores-aprendices y locutores en varios ambientes; se estudiaron su desempeño en la vida escolástica y disciplinaria a través de las interacciones con y las representaciones de los objetos y modos relacionados con diferentes materias escolares.

Palabras clave: conciencia disciplinaria, configuración disciplinaria, universo de la escritura, posición del sujeto, materia escolar.

1. INTRODUCTION

We would like to take advantage of the opportunity this special issue provides to present a few of the concepts that we have progressively developed in our research group and that we use as tools for carrying out empirical research concerning L1 French and other academic disciplines, from pre-primary grades through to the end of higher education (for this last level, the research has been about how students appropriate research writing).

The THEODILE research group (*Théorie-Didactiques de la Lecture-Ecriture: Theory and Didactics¹ of Reading and Writing*)² has been working, since its creation in 1991, on questions relative to the relationships among reading, writing, teaching and learning. The group, made up at first principally of researchers in French language learning, grew to include education theorists in other disciplines (math, science, history, geography), developmental psychologists, etc.

We will focus here on some of our research studies about:

- specific language activities, such as “description” (see for example Reuter 2000, Reuter, ed, 1998 a and 1998 b, and 2000)
- relationships and interactions between reading and writing (see Reuter, ed, 1994 and 1995)
- student writers’ relationship with writing and the self-image of the writer (see Delcambre & Reuter, eds, 2001 and 2002).
- relationships between writing practices and the construction of knowledge in university studies (see Brassart, 2000; Dabène & Reuter, 1998; Boch &

¹ Theory whose object is learning and teaching across all grades. See Donahue, this issue.

² Constituted by members from the Université Charles-de-Gaulle Lille III department of Education Science and the IUFM (Institut Universitaire de Formation de Maîtres: University Institute of Teacher Development) of Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

Grossmann, 2001; Boch, Laborde-Milaa & Reuter, 2004; Delcambre & Jovenet, eds, 2002; Delcambre & Reuter, 2004).

- relationships between writing practices and the construction of knowledge in preschool, middle school and high school studies (see Barré de Miniac & Reuter, 2000; Lahanier-Reuter & Reuter 2002).

It is important to note that these empirical studies function in interaction with our theoretical work about the formalization of written texts, of reading, of writing and of the teaching and learning of these (Reuter 1996) as well as our work about the (re) construction of principle concepts in the ‘*didactique*’ of French and in didactics more generally.

2. THE WRITING UNIVERSE, GENRES, AND PRACTICES

The first concept we will present is that of the “*writing universe*” which, in the frame of a materialist approach to school-based phenomenon, builds from three complementary principles:

- 1) learners’ activities (in this case, reading and writing) are best analyzed in the forms in which they are actualized as *practices* (Reuter 1996: 58-59), which implies that we must take into account several important features: the modalities of the activity (for example, writing, as opposed to reading, imposes more limited postures, produces linguistic signs, and transforms the actual object onto which written text is transcribed), the articulation among the different dimensions in play (language-based, cognitive, psycho-affective, socio-cultural...), the actualization (context, space-time, postures, gestures, tools, medium), the integration into a socio-institutional sphere of practices (in this case, the sphere of school), the fact that learners are inscribed in both an individual and a collective history, the modes of relationship with the student-subject’s other practices, and the meaning attributed by the subject;
- 2) these are shaping practices, insofar as they give shape to activities, and structure: their meaning, the representations of the players, the relationships established between writing and knowing, as well as numerous other effects (of appropriation, of investment, of resistance);
- 3) these practices are themselves structured by *universes* – in this case, of writing or, more specifically, of teaching writing – understood to be systems, articulating in a given socio-cultural space (here, school) the components of written texts while organizing their operations in an umbrella group of situations.

In order to be able to detail these writing universes (or, in other research work, speech universes), we have carried out ethnographic-style observations in different primary school classrooms (longitudinal studies, attentive to everyday functions and happenings) that permitted us to develop an analytic rubric, a methodological tool that we continue to refine (Giguère 2003, Giguère & Reuter 2004). This analytic rubric is organized around four dimensions: the written texts themselves, the *supports* (objects on which writing is done: paper, screen, notebook...), the tools and the practices.

Each of these four dimensions is itself detailed with the help of additional descriptive criteria such as category, names applied,³ quantity, range, places, author, source (who brings the writing into the class?), purposes, real uses, fixed or developing nature, or implied relationship to error (for example, error treated as a dysfunction to stigmatize or error treated as a tool that informs the teacher and the student, something to work with).

As far as the practices are concerned, we have also worked on detailing their *modalities* in relation to situations – open or closed, imposed or chosen, collective or individual, cooperative or competitive, short or long – with all of the possible variants along this continuum, as well as their *functions*. These functions have so far been classified into 18 open categories: to punish, to pass the time, to develop personal interests, to develop the imagination (taste and culture), to regulate collective life, to regulate classwork, to value, to socialize school work, to inscribe in a story, to express oneself/communicate, to create knowledge, to institutionalize knowledge, to apply or practice, to correct, to improve, to evaluate, to reflect on one's work, to act as recourse... In addition, the analysis is complemented by an analysis of *articulations* and *norms*. The analysis of articulations bears on existing relationships among different writing practices, between writing practices and oral practices, between writing practices and other semiotic systems (drawing, for example), or between scholastic practices and extracurricular writing activities. The analysis of norms concerns primarily their nature as imposed or co-constructed, rigid or modifiable, general or specific.

Thus this concept of *writing universes* – and the analytic tool we have created – give us frames for the analysis of writing in different scholastic spaces. It allows us to carry out comparisons (across time periods, levels or curricular domains, disciplines, classes...). It gives us as well a frame of reference for refining certain analyses, for example those of the tools and *supports* in question (Chartier & Renard 2000, Giguère & Reuter 2003). It seems to enable the development of a more subtle relationship between teaching [plans] and modalities of learning, between ways that writing practices work and ways that appropriation (or not) of reading, writing, knowledge and know-how are put into play through written text.

We would like to add here four remarks concerning the notion of *practices* that we believe to be fundamental:

- 1) this notion emphasizes the *diversity* of forms that the activity of writing can take on;
- 2) it attracts attention, in a complementary way, to the multiple ways in which it is embodied, in particular by enabling the interaction of three dimensions: the physico-material, the mental (cognitive operations called on or realized), and the meaning-making (meaning attributed to the practice by the participants);⁴

³ Names that can vary for a single object (for example, red notebook or science notebook) and depending on different players (teacher, students).

⁴ This means in particular that two practices, apparently identical, can in fact turn out to be different depending on the articulation between these dimensions: taking notes for oneself or for someone else, for immediate comprehension or later comprehension, in relation to the

- 3) it allows us to specify what “really” happens in the name of writing (or reading) in classrooms, what competencies are targeted, and, consequently, how this is congruent or dissonant with students’ extracurricular writing practices and how they see these, as well as with the possible social practices of reference;
- 4) it enables a more precise linking (cf. 2) of activities and disciplines.

We believe that it is easier to understand, in this perspective, why the notion of *genre* is indispensable: both for specifying the categories of writing asked for and targeted, and in order to participate in the construction of practices, insofar as the genre can be understood only in light of the production and the reception that it is made of and that it singularizes in return. This notion of genre, essential to our approach, can be further clarified. We situate our understanding of genre at the crossroads of three kinds of work that we find convergent: the work of Bakhtin (1984), of discourse analysis and in particular Maingueneau’s work (1997 and 2004 for example), and the work on school genres carried out by our own team. Genres are, for us, discursive units, belonging to a given socio-cultural sphere, which determines and constrains (by its key components) the forms chosen. The components are:

- its materiality (for example, in writing, the medium, the size, the ways it is presented);
- its peritextual indicators (in the way Genette describes these, 1982 and 1987, as for example any identification of the author, the recipient, the date...);
- its linguistic actualization (lexical, syntactic, rhetorical...);
- its enunciative markers (explicit or implicit control over the discourse, announced subjectivity or not, organization of content through, for example, modes of linkage or hierarchization...);
- the thematic domains and the “treatable” contents in those domains, in terms of specific conditions of production and reception (categories of authors, relationships among these, implied temporality, specs, functions, stakes, and types of evaluation in play...).

Genres thus format what can be said and its shapes in a given social space. In this framework, genre and practices function in interaction with each other in order to enable us to understand the diversity and the modalities of actualization or writing and of written texts. In other words, it is not writing in general which is implemented in school in order to create student writers who can produce any genre but rather *singular writerly practices* linked to defined genres in order to produce (or that produce) writers, more or less specialized in such and such a domain.

This first point can be concluded provisionally by emphasizing that the notion of *universe* is, without a doubt, close to those of context or of milieu. It presents, in our mind, two advantages:

- it immediately associates a group of elements to a *constructed* world;
- it constitutes the subject in relation to this world with which he/she is confronted and which he/she (re) constitutes as well, which he/she can have more

main purpose of the teacher’s discourse or in relation to the writer’s interests, because it is necessary, because it is interesting, or to keep from falling asleep...

or less trouble penetrating, which he/she can resist or from which he/she might want to escape....

3. DISCIPLINARY CONFIGURATIONS, DISCIPLINARY AWARENESS, AND RELATIONSHIP(S) TO WRITING

The analysis of writing universes can also enable us to detail certain aspects of *disciplinary configurations*. By introducing the notion of *disciplinary configuration* (Lahanier-Reuter & Reuter 2004), we posit three complementary and, from our perspective, fundamental theses. First of all, the knowledge and the know-how proposed as teachable and/or learnable in school situations take place in disciplines that give them a pre-determined status (more or less important, more or less explicit) and specific forms. But these disciplines, far from being monolithic, static entities, are differently actualized through forms of *disciplinary configuration*, each one variable, each one depending on time period, space (prescriptive, formative, practical...), grade level, track, pedagogical modes, etc. Thus, in certain cases, the discipline of L1 French will be actualized in the form of a configuration foregrounding the analysis of language sub-systems (spelling, grammar, lexicon) and the analysis-valuing of “legitimate” literature through classical school exercises (from dictation to the *explication de texte*). In other cases, the disciplinary configuration of L1 French will give priority to textual production, to development of the imagination, to expression and communication, allowing a highly diverse range of written assignments, varying the situations as much as possible and using “innovative” modes such as writing games or long essays. The disciplinary configurations – and this is our third point – thus determine to a great degree, via the organization of content and of writing or speech universes, the forms and uses of writing practices, the meaning given them, and the representations accompanying them. They thus determine indissociably the relationships between writing content and writing practices.

But these disciplinary configurations are not necessarily obvious to students. This realization brought us to construct the complementary notion of *disciplinary awareness* (Reuter 2003) to designate the manner in which students reconstruct and represent to themselves the various school-based (academic) disciplines, along axes such as the greater or lesser precision and the modalities of organization of the components of a discipline.

This notion seems to us to be quite fundamental for at least two reasons:

- 1) it constitutes a specification, indispensable in our view, of the analysis of representations in school situations, in particular those related to relationships to writing/written text and relationships between written text and disciplinary knowledge;
- 2) it permits, building on the foundational work of Michel Brossard (1994, 2002...), the clarification of factors contributing to students’ success or failure in school, disciplinary awareness being imagined here as an essential modality of the construction and clarity of what is being learned.

Indeed, several of our laboratory’s ongoing research projects (Ségismont 2004, Van Meenen 2004), based on questionnaires and interviews carried out in elemen-

tary schools, tend to show that disciplinary awareness undergoes significant variations depending on the discipline, the class and the students. So, for example, certain students are fairly able to indicate the knowledge and know-how at stake in a given discipline, can use multiple indicators to find their way in a disciplinary space (schedule, assignments, content, activities...), and, on top of this, have fairly clear ideas about the purposes and the interests of a given discipline. For others, on the other hand, this is far from true... and scholastic life seems to be, for them, more mired in indeterminism or confusion among disciplines, in a juxtaposition of situations and knowledges that remain non-integrated into meaningful wholes.

Moreover, other published research (Lanhanier-Reuter & Reuter 2002) or research in press (Constant-Berthe) shows that the *relationship with written text* within each discipline is connected to disciplinary awareness. This research, built on questionnaires, interviews and student writing, in elementary, middle, and high school, highlights in particular the idea that, in certain disciplines (represented symbolically here by math), the “content” is considered important and reliable while writing is considered secondary and transparent (but precise and subject to the rule of economy of expression). On the other hand, in other disciplines (represented symbolically here by L1 French), students consider the “content” as secondary and less reliable, but consider writing to be important, even though they might associate it with underlying usage, forms, “filling up the page,” or even with “hot air” or “sweet talk.” In a complementary way, certain types of linguistic behaviors are massively associated with certain disciplines (description, for example, with L1 French), and much less noticed in other disciplines (description in math, for example). In another complementary relationship, practices of revision and correction do not focus on the same dimensions (spelling and syntax in some cases, content knowledge in others...).

We would like to conclude this section by insisting on three points. First, the research focus we have taken up is very important in that it is about elements of locating, identifying and structuring school-based knowledge and know-how. From this point of view, we are infinitely indebted to Michel Brossard’s work, even if we are introducing more clearly than he did the notion of *disciplinary awareness* as the prism, as the point of mediation between the construction and the possible appropriation of knowledge. However, it is too soon to draw firm conclusions: empirical research has not yet been sufficiently carried out, and the relationship between this and student performance is far from established. In addition, the value of the notion we have proposed still needs to be developed, for what it might enable us to understand in and of itself (with respect to notions of “representation” or “relationship to...”) and what it might enable us to illuminate with respect to the differences among students and to the variations rooted in different pedagogical approaches.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF TENSIONS

We will evoke a final notion, fundamental for us, but of a different type no doubt than those presented so far, in that it is more a principle of analysis. This notion shows, indeed, the importance we give to *heterogeneity* (more than homogeneity) in

our approach to the objects, representations, and practices that we consider to be *formations of compromise in unstable balance*, in response to problems structured by opposing poles and subject to multiple imperatives of different kinds.

To take just a few examples drawn from our research, *written texts* are structured through heterogeneous, perhaps even antagonistic dimensions (material, formal, conceptual): the economy needed for clarity and for managing readers' interest vs. the expansion needed for understanding and highlighting material, for example. Students' *written school texts* often oscillate between selecting information showing the student's desire to be precise in answering the assignment and the student's desire to show off as much knowledge as possible. The *writer's subject position*, in research writing done as part of students' masters' theses and dissertations, must develop in a delicate balance between the position of researcher and the position of apprentice-researcher (Reuter 1998 and 2004), which can explain, among other things, students' reticence in explaining concepts and theories they feel their evaluators have already mastered, the difficulties they face in distinguishing among opposing positions of well-known theorists, or their tendency to quote extensively because they feel all paraphrase or reformulation will be expressed less effectively than in the original source. The *representations of writing* hesitate between the desire to express oneself and the fear of exposing oneself (Dabène 1987). Complementarily, genres and practices risk coming into conflict *within the school system itself*. And so for example the integration of techniques such as note-taking can, if practices of lexical abbreviation and syntactic ellipses are transferred to other forms of writing, expose the student writer to negative evaluations. The use of symbols, authorized in fields like science or math, is forbidden in L1 French; the search for descriptive originality, valued in L1 French, is illegitimate in other disciplinary spaces.

As we can see, if the notion of *tension* undeniably complicates the analysis of textual objects (to be thought of in terms of heterogeneity, tensions, balances and imbalances), it is on the other hand quite interesting for bringing to light problematic textual spaces, certain student writers' difficulties, the complexity of strategies writers need to put into play, as well as the differences, even the divergences between genres or activities in a single discipline or between disciplines. It has at least two key advantages: the advantage of opening up a range of interpretations related to the possible sources of learners' dysfunctions (Reuter, in press) and the advantage of analyzing reading and writing, not as an application of norms or of rules, but as a management of problems. So, paradoxically, the notion of *tensions*, founded on the need to take into account heterogeneity and conflicted areas, can perhaps re-establish some homogeneity in our current frames of understanding student-subjects, their practices, and the learning of those practices.

To conclude this too-brief overview, we hope to have been able to make clear the need for the concepts we use in order to analyze writing practices in the disciplines and across the curriculum. They seem relatively limited at this point in time. We are quite aware of the fact that these concepts are still far from forming a system and that their methodological operationalization raises several questions. This is why they should be taken as elements up for debate, for critique and possibly – we hope – for collaboration.

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